

“Showing Kindness and Living in Grace”
Sermon Series on the Life of David #8
Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes
First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
July 15, 2018
(2 Sam. 9:1-13)

Introduction.

One Christmas a woman told her four-year-old niece that the whole family was going to come to the aunt's house to exchange names for Christmas. The little girl thought about this for a little while, and then she started to cry. Her aunt asked her, "What's the matter, honey?" The little girl said between sobs, "But I don't want to exchange names. I like being Emily!"¹ She didn't understand it was a way of deciding to whom each of the family members would give presents at Christmas.

There is one person in the Bible I'm not sure would have shared Emily's sentiment, and we read about him in our passage this morning. Mephibosheth is one of the most unusual names in the Bible, and I don't think I've ever done a baptism for a child who has that name. It's an odd name which means "breaker of shame" or "breaker of idols." Even the meaning of the name is a little bit strange.

And yet, this story in 2 Samuel 9 is a remarkable tale of kindness and grace, and it serves as an example of how we should treat others. David's demonstration of kindness and living in grace points me to the way of Christ, and it's something I need to learn more about. Perhaps you do, too.

I. The Kindness of David.

Mephibosheth was the son of Jonathan, David's oldest and best friend, and he was the grandson of Saul, who had been the king of Israel. There are three times in the Bible when Mephibosheth is mentioned. The first time is when he was only five-years-old (2 Sam. 4). Saul and his son Jonathan had been tragically killed in battle by the Philistines, and when news of this reached the king's palace in Gibeon, everyone in the royal house fled for fear of their lives.

In her panic, Mephibosheth's nurse grabbed the five-year-old and ran out of the palace, but in her haste, she tripped and fell on him, crushing his feet and legs. In the fall, both of the boy's ankles were broken, and he was crippled. All of the household servants escaped east across the Jordan River valley, and they carried Mephibosheth with them and went to a small village known as Lo Debar. There Mephibosheth grew up in obscurity, and he grew up lame. The bones in his feet and legs never healed properly.

Once Mephibosheth lived as the grandson of the king, and the palace was his home. He was heir to the throne, and everything was going his way. Then the world changed for him forever in one day's time. His father was killed, his grandfather also died, and while he was making his escape from the palace he lost the use of his legs. My, how one's good fortune can turn on a dime!

Have you ever had an experience like that? Everything seemed to be going so well, you had the world by the tail, and tomorrow looked very bright. But then suddenly there is a chain of events beyond your control which turns your world completely upside down. You go from being the grandson of the king to a life on the run, from enjoying good health to being a cripple, from living in the palace to living in Lo Debar. I've been through times like that. Maybe you have, too.

The second time we read about Mephibosheth in the Bible is in this passage. He's been living for a number of years in Lo Debar, a town whose name means "no thing" or "no pastureland." In other words, it was a very desolate place. He's been a cripple there his whole life, and in this obscure town he's been trying to eek out a living.

Then one day a group of strangers knock on his door, and they tell him he's wanted in Jerusalem. David, the new king of Israel, wanted to see him. To Mephibosheth that could mean only one thing. The king was looking for any remaining descendents of his former enemy Saul who would pose a threat to his throne, and he was determined to eliminate any possible challenge to his kingdom. David had suffered much at the hands of Saul, and now it was time for payback.

Mephibosheth was taken to Jerusalem, and he was escorted into the presence of the king. He anticipated the worst and probably steeled himself for what he knew would be coming, and Mephibosheth prostrated himself before David to pay homage to the king. We can see that he struggled with low self-esteem because he refers to himself a dead dog, and he demonstrated his utter humiliation and fear before David.

What a surprise it must have been to hear the king call him by name, "Mephibosheth!" Then David said, "Relax, everything's going to be all right. I want to restore to you all the land that was your grandfather's, and I want his former servants to farm the land and provide for you financially. What's more, I want you to eat at my table like one of my own children."

What Mephibosheth didn't know when he was brought into David's court, and he never could have imagined in his wildest dreams, is that he was brought there to be loved. A few days earlier David had asked if there were any descendents of Saul still living to whom he could show favor in honor of his friend Jonathan. There had been wars to fight and borders to secure, but now David was ready to do the work of being the king, and he began with kindness. It's always a good way to start.

Another thing Mephibosheth didn't know was that years earlier David made a promise to his father Jonathan, and he pledged to stick by his friend and to continue that same loyal love to his descendents in the future, regardless of whatever happened (1 Sam. 20:14-15, 42). David was a man of his word, and he fulfilled that vow to the fullest.

Just as quickly as Mephibosheth's good fortune had been reversed years before when he was five, so now just as quickly his bad fortune was turned to good. He went from being an outcast to being a favored member of the king's court. He went from eking out a living to having his material needs provided for. He went from the outhouse of Lo Debar to the penthouse of the king's palace. And he went from feeling like a dead dog to feeling like a favored child. All because of the kindness of David.

II. The Kindness of God.

The Hebrew word *hesed*, which is translated "kindness" in this passage, is a very important and interesting word in the Bible. (Say the word with me.) It's difficult to translate it into English, and no single word in our language can convey its whole meaning. So, we attempt to express what is being said here with phrases like "steadfast love," "covenant love," and "loving kindness." What we're trying to get at is the kind of emotion and dedication that is felt and expressed between parents and children, or between lovers, or between the deepest of friends. But added to that emotion is the idea of dependability, loyalty, and unswerving commitment. This sort of kindness isn't often found in our world today, but it's badly needed.

The fascinating thing in all this is that *hesed* is a word that is often used in Scripture to describe God's love for us. We who have been made in the image of God are the object of His loving kindness, His *hesed*. Even though at one time we were at enmity with God, the Lord never gave up on us. In His loving kindness, God sent His Son to die on the cross for our sins. He paid the penalty we deserve, and He extended to us mercy and grace.

There was nothing about Mephibosheth that deserved David's *hesed*, and there is nothing in us that deserves God's kindness either. It is unmerited favor and love, not because of who we are but because of who God is and the promise He made to us in Christ. Notice what David says in this text. He asks, "Is there no one left in the house of Saul to whom I can show *God's* kindness?" It was because David had experienced God's *hesed* in his own life that he in turn could express that same kindness to someone else.

When have you have truly experienced the loving kindness of God in your life? It's hard to keep it to yourself, isn't it? As Jesus said, the one who has been

forgiven much loves much, and the kindness of God is something that becomes contagious. You want to give it away.

The fact of the matter is that all of us are like Mephibosheth in one way or another. We might not be physical cripples like he was, but we're all crippled nonetheless. We are crippled in our hearts and we're crippled in our minds, all because of past wounds we've experienced that never quite healed right. The pain of life has left all of us broken people. I've got a broken heart just like you do. Life has dealt me some crippling blows in the last few years. We all need the healing of God, and when you experience His loving kindness, it provides a glimpse into heaven, and it makes the Gospel all the more real.

III. Our Kindness to Others.

The Bible teaches that you and I are actually invited to be channels of God's loving kindness to others, just like David was here. Each of us has opportunities every single week to reject the temptations of power and bitterness and instead express God's loving kindness to people who doesn't deserve it.

Whether it's a rebellious child or a bitter ex-husband, an angry co-worker or a demanding boss, an abusive parent or someone who has taken advantage of us, every time we don't return evil for evil but rather return evil with good, we express the loving kindness of God and share in His ministry of reconciliation and hope. This doesn't mean we should be co-dependent or enable bad behavior. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to speak truth to someone and hold them accountable for the things they say and do.

And yet to be a channel of God's loving kindness to people when they don't deserve it is to reject the desire to be bitter or to get even. We can leave justice in the hands of God, who is in a much better position than we are to sort things out, and we can look to Him to be our defender. When we are channels of God's loving kindness, we create hope and healing, and the rippling effect can be dramatic.

The recent eruptions of the Kilauea Volcano on the big Island of Hawaii have reminded me of what happened on Mount St. Helens in the state of Washington back in 1980. Do you remember it? Intense heat from that volcano melted the dirt, leaving bare rock covered with a thick coat of ash. Members of the Forest Service wondered how much time would have to pass before any living thing would grow there again. I read that one day a park employee stumbled across a lush patch of vegetation formed in the shape of an elk. Plants had sprouted from the organic material that lay where the elk had been buried by the volcanic ash. From then on, the naturalists looked for such patches of green in order to calculate the loss of wildlife.

Philip Yancey has written that as followers of Christ we can help establish patches of green in the gray ash of a lost and decaying world. In the midst of hate and strife we can offer forgiveness and peace. In the midst of oppression and injustice we can offer freedom and fairness. In the midst of immorality and falsehood we can offer righteousness and truth.² This is what it means to be a channel of God's *hesed* to a lost and broken world.

Conclusion.

How will you help establish a patch of green in the coming week where you live, work and play? Where does God want you to be a channel of his loving kindness? How can you use your position of influence, like David did, to extend kindness to someone who is crippled in one way or another?

I close with this. Many years ago, my friend Vic Pentz spent a night in a homeless shelter. It was because he received a phone call from the chairman of the board of the shelter in Houston where Vic lived at the time, and the man asked if he would you be willing to go undercover with him and spend the night among the homeless on the streets of downtown Houston? Vic agreed, and he put on an old pair of jeans and a grubby t-shirt. He also wore a McDonald's hat with a coffee stain on it. A few hours later, the man's wife dropped the two of them off seven blocks from the Star of Hope Men's Shelter in downtown Houston.

When they arrived, their story was that they had been referred there by the Red Cross, and they were interviewed as they checked in. "Are you on drugs?" No. "Had any mental problems?" No. "Do you have a job?" Vic didn't want to lie, so because he was a pastor, Vic said he worked one day a week! They wrote down "unemployed"! Then they lined up and took showers. All around Vic were men whose bodies showed the ravages of life on the streets. He realized he was surrounded by a bunch of Mephibosheths – disposable people in our society.

Before dinner a rhythm and blues gospel band led a worship service. Vic said he will never forget the singer of the band who walked out with a big smile on his face, looked at all the men, and said, "You are royalty!" Vic was feeling about as unroyal as he had ever felt in his whole life! And yet the singer walked up to one of the men, and he bowed low to the ground and said, "Greetings, your highness!" He sang a song about how even though David was a shepherd boy, God saw him as a king. The singer closed by walking through the audience putting his hand over every man's head saying, "King!" "King!" "King!" "King!" All the guys cheered.³

The men in that shelter had one advantage over you and me. Their needs were obvious on the outside. In a homeless shelter, sleeping on a borrowed bed, you have no place to hide. You can't fool anybody. But for those of us here on a Sunday morning, we can hide behind our nice clothes and our polite smiles.

However, as much as we may try to hide it, we're all Mephibosheths – wounded, hurting, crippled, afraid, and feeling rejected by someone. But this morning, God leaps from His throne and shouts your name! Joseph! Sally! John! Gretchen! Walter!

He wants you to come to Him so that, in the words of David written in Psalm 8, God might crown you with glory and honor and give you the joy of living as His heir for all eternity. God has a crown just for you, and He has one for me. And there is nothing in this awful world that can remove that crown from our heads or tarnish our royal pedigree. You're a child of the King!

God looks out over this congregation and says with great joy and confidence, "King!" "Queen!" "King!" "Queen!" "King!" "Queen!" As sons and daughters of God Almighty, may we go forth from this place and be channels of God's loving kindness to others in the coming week. Share what you have received from God today with someone who doesn't deserve it. That's what David did for Mephibosheth, and it's what Jesus did for you and me. May we go and live in the same manner in His name. Amen.

¹ From *Country Woman*, November/December, 1990.

² Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, 253.

³ Vic Pentz, "The True Measure of Greatness," 4. Preached at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA, on October 24, 2004.